

Last Item

The TV Column

By John Carmody
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TV's favorite punching bag, Geraldo Rivera, vied with a rare one-minute snowfall in the San Fernando Valley for attention here Saturday as NBC opened its stand at the semiannual network press tour . . .

Months after his NBC special on Satanism threw TV writers into a feeding frenzy, both NBC president Robert Wright, talking via satellite to the press from Boca Raton, Fla., and NBC Entertainment president Brandon Tartikoff found themselves still fielding questions about Mr. Respectability . . .

Wright finally came out and said he didn't regret airing the special after all . . .

"It was difficult material," he said. "It's interesting to know . . . that I have received letters and contact by a number of people, most of whom seem to be teachers, expressing surprise that we aired that show, and in the next paragraph, expressing thanks for getting out on the table something that they felt that many communities are unwilling to talk about, that is a very major issue in high schools around the country. These are primarily high school teachers . . .

"All of the issues that that Geraldo special dealt with apparently are much better known to high school students, high school teachers and people involved in PTAs at the high school level than perhaps you and I and lots of other people would like to believe" . . .

Tartikoff began his State of the Network address in the afternoon with a skit in which actor Bill Morey, dressed as a Catholic priest, showed up with a stack of Bibles and asked him to "solemnly swear" that "I will not buy any more specials from Geraldo Rivera and that I will not seek to buy or option a sequel to 'The Goddess of Love'" . . .

Tartikoff went along with the pledge, adding only "but I would like to work with Vanna White again" . . .

The priest also asked him to pledge that "I will not put on the air a movie called 'The Sex Tapes'" . . .

"Uh, Father," said Tartikoff. "That movie has already been produced. We bought it for the February sweeps. Isn't there some sort of dispensation for that?" . . .

"Oh, it's for the sweeps, is it? Well, perhaps we can talk about a change of title" . . .

"Okay," said Tartikoff, "I'll have my girl call your girl" . . .

Tartikoff also announced a Monday night experiment, on Feb. 6, when a "Night of 1,000 Laughs" will feature six of NBC's most popular

sitcoms right in a row—"The Cosby Show," "ALF," "The Golden Girls," "Empty Nest," "Cheers" and "Night Court" . . .

Key to the experiment—to see if comedies can play well in the 10 to 11 p.m. time slot usually reserved for dramas at comedy-rich NBC . . .

NBC will also bring back the 1955 production of "Peter Pan," starring Mary Martin, on March 24, Good Friday . . .

The miniseries is not dead at NBC, Tartikoff emphasized. In addition to the "Around the World in 80 Days" remake already scheduled, and a treatment of the *Roe v. Wade* landmark Supreme Court case on abortion, NBC has added a four-hour production for May called "I Know My First Name Is Steven," based on the true-life California story of Steven Sayner, who was abducted in 1972 from his family when he was a child and returned seven years later . . .

Also planned is a four-hour "Cross of Fire," which will tell of the rise of the Ku Klux Klan in Indiana in the 1920s, and a six-hour project called "Desperados: The Kiki Camarena Story," which Tartikoff identified as a Time magazine cover story this past fall "based on the Elaine Shannon book" . . .

Wait, There's More

NBC will also air next Christmas season a four-hour production of "The Phantom of the Opera," to be written by Arthur Kopit . . .

Tartikoff said, "We are in the midst of putting the final negotiations on the half-hour version" of "Tattinger's," turning the failed Wednesday night drama about a New York restaurant into a comedy without a laugh track . . .

The NBC executive said producer Bruce Paltrow wants to rename the series "Formerly Tattinger's" but that his choice is "Many Reservations" . . .

Tartikoff identified his network's problem areas as two hours on Friday, the last 90 minutes of Wednesday, and Sunday, now that "Family Ties" is into its last season . . .

Still and all, in a season flawed by the aftereffects of the 22-week writers strike and less than dynamite ratings for the autumnal Summer Olympics, NBC still has 10 shows in the Top Fifteen so far and is well ahead of the competition . . .

Both Tartikoff and Wright expressed reservations about the value of major sports events as

promotional vehicles for the regular network schedules, a widely held fiction in the TV industry . . .

Wright suggested that the \$1.1 billion CBS deal to get a lock on major league baseball for four years starting in 1990—a vehicle for attracting audiences who will stay around for an entertainment schedule that has had “terrible success”—is a considerable gamble . . .

“I think what we’re having a lot of second thoughts about at NBC is that we’re not so sure that those major sporting events have that kind of punch in them,” Wright said . . .

He called the CBS baseball deal a move to “rent an audience” . . .

In Other News

When he wasn’t fighting his way through snow drifts outside the Registry Hotel here, Captain Airwaves has had a real exciting time of it . . .

Los Angeles Mayor Tom Bradley showed up to declare Saturday “‘Hunter’ Day” in L.A., marking the completion of the 100th episode of the NBC Saturday night crime drama (which airs Feb. 3). The mayor, who was virtually guaranteed a fifth term late last week when his top rival announced he was dropping out of contention, expressed concern for his “friend” D.C. Mayor Marion Barry, who’s been in the news himself lately . . . but otherwise had no comment for a reporter on Barry’s troubles . . .

Fred Dryer, who plays Hunter, complained that it was about time the show, after five years, got some serious consideration for a few Emmys . . .

He blames the lack of “critical acclaim” for the oversight by the Academy of Television Arts & Sciences and thinks TV writers ought to be paying more attention to the solid drama series and the work of costars Stepfanie Kramer, Charles Hallahan and Garrett Morris, among others . . .

“Too many writers look at a Stephen Cannell Production and just think of ‘The A-Team,’ ” Dryer growled . . .

Captain Airwaves nodded his head vigorously in agreement with Fred, who is about 10 feet tall, rides his motorcycle without wearing a helmet (although he is active in a movement to make helmets mandatory for young bikers) and has almost no sense of humor, NONE . . .

Fred’s 5-year-old daughter Caitlin also attended the NBC lunch honoring the show. She sat on

Stepfanie Kramer’s lap at a nearby table during most of the proceedings. Stepfanie is about four feet tall, has a twinkle in her eye and looked lovely in white . . .

“Everybody has a right to write what they want to write”—Robert C. Wright, NBC president and CEO . . .

Tartikoff also said he didn’t expect Johnny Carson’s or David Letterman’s late night ratings to change with the arrival of the syndicated Arsenio Hall and the “The Pat Sajak Show” on CBS this month . . .

He also downplayed stories that Carson might wind it up after this, his 27th year with the show. “I hope Johnny still likes doing the show and my suspicion is that his ratings aren’t going to change with these new challenges, nor will David’s . . .

He also said he doesn’t “believe Johnny’s contract is up this fall,” as some have reported . . .

As for the current craze for “trash TV,” Tartikoff said, “What will happen is that, I hope, it will burn itself out and, hopefully, there will be some new genres and some brave new forms that we can get behind and bring them on to television” . . .

“I define trash television as just television that—I mean, it’s like broadcasting traffic accidents. It’s the same phenomenon that makes us stop as we go by a traffic accident, [the same] as seeing the Chambers preppie thing on ‘Current Affairs’ and things of that nature to shock television” . . .

And Finally

She’s always been big for her britches, but now Roseanne Barr has apparently forced the departure of the man who created her ABC hit because of “creative tension” . . .

Matt Williams, one of three executive producers of “Roseanne,” “has elected to move on,” according to a statement from the Carsey-Werner company. Marcy Carsey and Tom Werner—who also produce “The Cosby Show” for NBC—remain on “Roseanne,” to nobody’s surprise . . .

Williams had been a writer for the Cosby series. Barr has an unusual amount of say-so in the way “Roseanne” is developed, since the blue-collar character she plays is so, well, Roseanne . . .

Richard Richter, a 20-year veteran of ABC News, has joined WETA as executive producer for news and public affairs programming, which makes him responsible for “development and management of major new productions for PBS distribution” . . .

Richter most recently has been a senior producer at ABC’s documentary unit, developer of the “Closeup” series . . .